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## Overcoming Stress Eating

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Although stress can trigger an increase in appetite, you can take steps to control these cravings and control your weight.

Stress can affect the way we think of food, either consciously or subconsciously. Some people respond to stress by having a decreased appetite while others have an increased appetite.

Usually the increase in consumption is with the foods that we enjoy or comfort us. Who cannot remember being given a cookie or some other treat as a child when we were hurt or upset in order to make us feel better? These foods tended to be high-calorie, sweet, and fatty foods. Over time we developed a pattern and may continue to choose these same items when stressed.

The adrenal glands produce a hormone called cortisol in response to stress, and cortisol increases appetite. After the stressful episode passes, cortisol levels should return to normal, but if the stress is chronic, cortisol may stay elevated along with your desire to eat.



Lovell FHCC offers telehealth MOVE weight loss classes that focus on smart eating, exercising and a supportive network for improving health and shedding pounds. Photo credit: Photo by MC2 Darren Moore.

Although stress can trigger an increase in appetite, you can take steps to control these cravings and control your weight. To help control stress eating, the Mayo Clinic recommends these tips:

- Tame your stress. Try a stress management technique, such as yoga, meditation or relaxation.
- Have a hunger reality check. Is your hunger physical or emotional? If you ate just a few hours ago and don't have a rumbling stomach, you're probably not really hungry. Give the craving a little time to pass.
- Keep a food diary. Write down what you eat, how much you eat, when you eat, how you're feeling when you eat and how hungry you are. Over time, you may see patterns emerge that reveal the connection between mood and food.
- Get support. You're more likely to give in to emotional eating if you lack a good support network. Lean on family and friends or consider joining a support group.

- Fight boredom. Instead of snacking when you're not truly hungry, distract yourself.
- Take away temptation. Don't keep supplies of comfort foods in your home or desk if they're hard for you to resist.
- Snack healthy. If you feel the urge to eat between meals, choose a low-fat, low-calorie snack, such as fresh fruit, vegetables with low-fat dip or unbuttered popcorn. Another option is to try low-fat, lower calorie versions of your favorite foods to see if they satisfy your cravings.
- Learn from setbacks. If you have an episode of stress eating, forgive yourself and start fresh the next day. Try to learn from the experience and make a plan for how you can prevent it in the future. Focus on the positive changes you're making in your eating habits and give yourself credit for making changes that'll lead to better health.

If you've tried these self-help options but you still can't get control of your eating, consider therapy with a professional mental health provider. Therapy can help you understand the motivations behind your emotional eating and help you learn new coping skills.

Additional information can be found at: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/weight-loss/in-depth/weight-loss/art-20047342>

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